



## Issue 4

December 2024

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### Hello from NICOLA!

It's been a whole year since our last newsletter and we're excited to share some great news – it's time for NICOLA Wave 3! We have been hard at work over the last year getting everything ready – thank you so much for your patience. Soon, we'll be reaching out to everyone who has taken part before to invite you to join us again.

In this newsletter, you will meet some of the team working behind the scenes on NICOLA. We will also explain what Wave 3 will involve and what to expect when you take part. You will also find out about some recent interesting scientific discoveries from the NICOLA study.

### What does NICOLA do?

NICOLA stands for the **N**orthern **I**reland **C**ohort for the **L**ongitudinal Study of **A**geing.

- A **cohort** is a group of people
- A **longitudinal study** is a study that is carried out over a long period of time

NICOLA is a **longitudinal cohort study**, which means it follows a group of people over a long period of time! The group of people we are particularly interested in are those aged 50+ living in Northern Ireland.



## Thank You!



As always, a big thank you to you, the participants, for your continued support. You play a huge part in helping us learn about staying healthy as we get older – we couldn't do it without you!



## Meet the team!

NICOLA is overseen by a team of researchers and support staff based within the Centre for Public Health in Queen's University Belfast. The lead investigator on the study is Professor Bernadette McGuinness, who took over from Professor Frank Kee last year. Bernadette is a Clinical Professor of Ageing in the Centre for Public Health and a Consultant Geriatrician in the Belfast Trust, where she runs a clinic for people with memory problems. In her research Bernadette is particularly interested in understanding more about ageing, especially healthy ageing, and causes of dementia.



**Professor  
Bernadette  
McGuinness**



**Dr Gareth McKay**

Operations Lead

Research area: kidney health, diabetes



**Professor Ruth Hogg**

Eye Health Lead

Research area: eye health and disease



**Dr Emma Cunningham**

Health Assessment Lead

Research area: brain health, dementia



**Dr Leeanne O'Hara**

Scientific Officer

Research area: social determinants of health

Project Manager: Amanda Coulter

Data Manager: Angie Scott

Lead Research Nurse: Patricia Quinn

Administrators: Jill Loughlin & Susie Hart

## NICOLA Wave 3

We aim to follow up with our participants regularly over time to track changes in health and wellbeing. **Wave 1** was completed between 2013 and 2016. **Wave 2** was completed between 2017 and 2022. We are now excited to be starting **Wave 3!**

Wave 3 of NICOLA will start in January 2025, and we are looking forward to inviting you all back! This wave of the study will involve three things: a home-based interview, some questionnaires you can do in your own time and a physical health assessment.

**The NICOLA study benefits greatly from your willingness to give up your time to take part. We really hope that you will take part again when you hear from us!**

### How will we get in touch?

- You will receive an invitation letter from us for Wave 3.
- You will then receive two additional letters inviting you to take part in the home interview and health assessment.
- Contact details for the team will be included in the letters and are also at the end of this newsletter.

## What will wave 3 involve?

### Home interview

You will be invited to complete a one-hour face-to-face interview in your own home, at a time that is convenient to you. Questions will cover a range of topics, including your living arrangements, physical/mental health and friends and family.



### Questionnaires

You will be asked to complete some questionnaires that cover a broad range of issues that may be important to you. You can complete these in your own time, either online or via a paper copy.

### Health assessment

You will be invited to complete a physical health assessment at the Northern Ireland Clinical Research Facility based at Belfast City Hospital. This will include measuring your blood pressure and checking your vision and hearing using state of the art equipment.

The health assessment will be carried out by a member of our nursing team. You may have met one of our nurses before if you took part in the 65+ Memory and Thinking Study.

You will receive feedback on your health at the end.



**If you are unable to travel to Belfast, a nurse can visit you at home to complete the health assessment.**

## NICOLA Research Updates

The confidential data you provide is used by trusted researchers all over the world to investigate health and wellbeing of older adults. Here are two recent scientific publications that have used NICOLA data. You can find a list of all NICOLA publications on our website.

### Are pet owners more physically active?

This study examined whether pet ownership was associated with physical activity. Using data from NICOLA, the researchers found that older adults in Northern Ireland who owned a pet were more likely to engage in regular physical activity.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/jal3020011>

### Frailty on the island of Ireland

Frailty is a condition more common in older people – symptoms include difficulty walking and muscle loss. This study used data from NICOLA and The Irish Longitudinal Study of Ageing (TILDA) to compare frailty rates between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Results showed that frailty was twice as common among older adults in NI (29%) compared to RoI (15%). Frailty has a big impact on health and social care. More research is needed to understand the causes of this difference.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckae046>



# Spotlight on: The NICOLA 65+ Memory and Thinking Study

Recently, we conducted an extra study with NICOLA participants called the NICOLA 65+ Memory and Thinking Study, which aimed to learn more about how and why our thinking skills might change as we get older.

Taking part involved a visit with a research nurse, during which participants completed lots of tests, such as learning and remembering lists of words or stories and solving number problems.

In total, **1037** NICOLA participants completed the thinking tests between February 2022 and November 2023. By looking at how well NICOLA participants did on the tests of memory and thinking, we can get an idea of how healthy older people's brains are in Northern Ireland.



Similar studies have been carried out in lots of countries around the world. By taking part in the Memory and Thinking Study, participants have contributed to a very important international resource that can be used to explore what things might predict our memory and thinking performance as we get older.

You can read more about the NICOLA 65+ Memory and Thinking Study by reading our published study protocol here: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2023-075672>

## Future plans



The NICOLA Healthy Ageing Panel is a panel made up of NICOLA participants and other volunteers. The group plays a very important role in helping us decide what kind of information we should collect and how we should collect it.

We will also be contributing to the Northern Ireland Science Festival. This will take place 15th – 16th February 2025 across the University Campus.

We are planning to hold a meeting of the NICOLA Healthy Ageing Panel in 2025. If you are interested in becoming a member of the panel, then please get in touch with us using the contact details below!



### Change in contact details?

To keep you informed of study developments it is very important that we have up-to-date contact information for you. If you have recently changed your home address, phone number or email please let us know by contacting us via:

**Phone:** 028 9097 8923 or 028 9097 8926

**Email:** [NICOLA@qub.ac.uk](mailto:NICOLA@qub.ac.uk)

**Post:** NICOLA Study, Centre for Public Health, Queen's University Belfast, Institute of Clinical Sciences Block B, Grosvenor Road, Belfast, BT12 6BJ

You can keep up with the latest news from the NICOLA team on our website:

[www.qub.ac.uk/sites/NICOLA](http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/NICOLA)

**NICOLA is supported by:**

